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Review of the Information Systems Coordination Committee

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

In considering the proposed programme budget for jointly financed activities for the biennium 2000-2001, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions recommended that the role and future of the Information Systems Coordination Committee be reviewed and that, pending the outcome of such a review, the appropriation of the United Nations share of the budget be withheld. In its resolution 54/249 of 23 December 1999, the General Assembly endorsed that recommendation and requested the Secretary-General, pending the outcome of the review, to identify appropriate resources to finance the United Nations share of the cost of the Committee for the first year of the biennium 2000-2001, and to report thereon in the context of the first performance report.

The present report summarizes the current state of the review of the role of the Committee, which is being carried out within the framework of the ongoing process of reform of the machinery of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, and presents the views of the Secretary-General on its usefulness and future role. The report confirms the commitment of the Administrative Committee on Coordination to ensuring the effective management of information technology and sets out the Secretary-General's support for the measures being taken by that Committee to reinforce the coordination of information and communications technology activities, through its High-level Management Committee and a strengthened coordination mechanism, building upon the Information Systems Coordination Committee. The coordination mechanism will draw and capitalize on the work accomplished so far by

* The present document is being submitted after the established deadline owing to the need to incorporate the results of inter-agency consultations on the issue.

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the Information Systems Coordination Committee and on related secretariat support arrangements, and will be based on a prioritization of existing work programmes and new initiatives. The report also stresses that the continuation of the many activities initiated by the Information Systems Coordination Committee is indispensable.

In the light of the above, the Secretary-General recommends the continued funding of the United Nations contribution to the Information Systems Coordination Committee for the biennium 2000-2001, and will reflect the necessary provisions in the first performance report for the biennium 2000-2001.

I. Introduction

1. In the context of its review of jointly financed activities in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions recommended that the role and future of the Information Systems Coordination Committee be reviewed and, pending the outcome of such a review, recommended against the appropriation of the United Nations share of the budget for that Committee.[1]

2. The General Assembly, in resolution 54/249 of 23 December 1999, endorsed the recommendations of ACABQ and requested the Secretary-General, pending the outcome of the review of the Information Systems Coordination Committee, to identify appropriate resources to finance the United Nations share of the cost of the Committee for the first year of the biennium 2000-2001, and to report thereon in the context of the first performance report.

3. The decision of the Assembly stemmed from a concern that the development of information technology systems throughout the United Nations Organization was an area that required special attention and was not being adequately addressed or coordinated. Since the Information Systems Coordination Committee is an integral part of the machinery of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, the present report deals with its role and the current review by the Administrative Committee on Coordination of its contribution and functioning in the broader context of the overall efforts of the Administrative Committee on Coordination to enhance the coordination of information and communication technology within the United Nations system.

II. Background

4. The Information Systems Coordination Committee was established in 1993, as part of a wider restructuring of the subsidiary machinery of the Administrative Committee on Coordination. Participants in the Information Systems Coordination Committee include senior information management and technology managers of organizations of the United Nations system. Managers and staff members of the information and communications technology departments of United Nations organizations participate in its working groups. A very small secretariat, comprising one Professional and one General Service staff member, supports the Committee's activities and the overall work of the Administrative Committee on Coordination in the field of information and communications technology. The mandate of the Information Systems Coordination Committee at present includes, inter alia, the provision of advice and medium-term and long-term strategic views to the Administrative Committee on Coordination; decisions on specific areas of information and communications technology that may require system-wide standardization; proposals on practices and standards that might be adopted by the organizations of the United Nations system; the provision of a forum for the exchange of information; and the development and maintenance of an electronic repository data on information systems.

5. In establishing the Information Systems Coordination Committee, the Administrative Committee on Coordination indicated that the Committee's first priority should be to create policies and standards to ensure wider accessibility of the information in the United Nations system. This priority was reaffirmed by the Economic and Social Council in various resolutions adopted since 1991, in which the Council stressed the importance of sharing information electronically, easily and accurately, regardless of which organization had created the information.

6. The requirement that prompted the establishment of the Committee remains, and sharing of and ensuring accessibility to information will continue to be actively pursued. Definite progress has been made in this area, and the work of the Committee on coordination in the administrative uses of information and communications technology and the production of technical standards, recommendations and guidelines has improved access to information throughout the system and, in some cases, generated savings. The extraordinary developments in the field of information technology and communications over the past few years have, however, shifted the focus and concern of member States and the Administrative Committee on Coordination with regard to inter-agency cooperation in that area. Information and communications technology has become pervasive in all programmatic and administrative activities, and the need for enhanced coordination, not only at the administrative but also at

the policy level, is becoming ever more apparent and urgent.

7. The request of the General Assembly in resolution 54/249 came at a time when, in response to the above-mentioned developments and needs, the Administrative Committee on Coordination had decided to undertake a wide-ranging discussion of information technology at its spring (northern hemisphere) session in 2000, addressing both its contribution to economic and social development and its role in enhancing the functioning of the United Nations system. It also followed a decision of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, adopted upon the initiative of the Secretary-General, to launch a further review of the Administrative Committee on Coordination and its subsidiary machinery. An important part of this review, which is currently in progress, is focused on the challenges posed for the United Nations system by the developments in the field of information and communications technology and the role and functions of the Information Systems Coordination Committee in that regard.

III. Review by the Administrative Committee on Coordination of inter-agency coordination in the field of information and communications technology

8. During the discussions by the Administrative Committee on Coordination of information technology at its spring session in 2000, the executive heads recognized that the effective management of information technology was critical to the effectiveness of the functioning of the system and, even more important, to its support for member States. The executive heads noted that the organizations of the system needed to become learning organizations, and that knowledge and learning capacity would increasingly determine development outcome rather than investment in physical capital alone. They therefore committed themselves to focusing on developing a culture of knowledge sharing and learning rather than on information technology alone.

9. The executive heads also noted that, in the period ahead, organizations of the United Nations system would need to cooperate more than ever before so as to avoid duplication of effort and enhance their ability to provide information technology solutions to member States. In order to enable the United Nations system to respond to these challenges and developments, the executive heads provided guidelines for a comprehensive and coordinated approach at the inter-agency level towards building a capacity for knowledge acquisition and dissemination. They agreed, inter alia, to focus on:

(a) Strengthening collaboration among organizations of the system in the field of information and communications technology, including at the country level;

(b) Organizing a system-wide community of information technology experts and users as a system-wide resource facility and service for information on information technology internal needs and for operational activities;

(c) Strengthening partnerships with the private sector;

(d) Developing an inventory of systems being used and evolved, in particular for communications between headquarters and the field, so that possible synergies could be better exploited.

10. The high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council held in July 2000, on the theme "Development and international cooperation in the twenty-first century: the role of information technology in the context of a knowledge-based global economy", was an important occasion for enhancing system-wide support in the field of information and communication technology. The many cooperative activities undertaken in support of the Council's work included a joint statement, in which the executive heads reaffirmed their previous statement on universal access to basic communications and information services and committed themselves to specific collaborative action to harness the power of new technology to promote development. Organizations of the United Nations system also contributed to the work of a number of panels convened in preparation for the Council's discussions, such as the panel on knowledge management, organized by the World Bank, the panel on universal access to information and informatics for human development, organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the panel on intellectual property aspects, organized by the WIPO.

11. The report of the Secretary-General to the Council on information and communications technology (E/2000/52) was prepared in close cooperation with the organizations of the system. Several executive heads participated in the Council's debate, together with key figures in the field of information technology. The ministerial declaration adopted by the Council[2] reaffirmed the key role of the United Nations system in mobilizing concerted efforts to bridge the digital divide and to expand the development impact of information and communication technology. It outlined the priorities for the United Nations system in this regard and encouraged the adoption of a strategy that would ensure coordination and synergy among programmes and activities of individual organizations, so as to transform the United Nations family into a knowledge-based system of organizations.

12. These developments are having a major influence on the direction of the ongoing review by the Administrative Committee on Coordination of its functioning, and the role and structure of its subsidiary machinery. The review has, among its key aims, enhancement of the effectiveness of the support provided by the Committee to intergovernmental bodies and the refocusing and streamlining of its subsidiary machinery. The review has, in the first instance, resulted in the establishment of two high-level committees to guide and strengthen inter-agency coordination in, respectively, the programme and management areas, and a process, which is currently under way, of review and streamlining of the subsidiary structures in these two areas. Guiding system-wide work in information and communications technology has been identified as one of the key responsibilities of the newly established High-level Committee on Management. In view of the importance and scope of coordination requirements in the field of information and communications technology the Administrative Committee on Coordination has requested the High-level Committee, as one of its main and first tasks, to focus on prioritizing work in this area and defining the parameters of a strengthened coordination mechanism for information and communications technology activities, building upon the work of the Information Systems Coordination Committee. Such a mechanism will be guided by and report to the new High-level Committee on Management. In view of the cross-cutting nature of information and communications technology, the coordination mechanism will provide advice for and support relevant aspects of the work and objectives of the High-level Committee on Programmes. Within this framework, the present secretariat of the Information Systems Coordination Committee will be called upon to support not only the activities of the coordination mechanism but also that of the two high-level committees and the Administrative Committee on Coordination itself in all matters related to information and communications technology.

13. The requirement for a strengthened coordination mechanism was consistently emphasized throughout the process of the review that led to the adoption of the above-mentioned decisions. As part of that process, a special inter-agency consultative meeting on the coordination of information technologies in the United Nations system was convened in 2000 to make proposals on the ways in which improved coordination and innovative uses of information and communications technology would serve to strengthen the effectiveness and impact of the work of the United Nations system. In making these proposals, attention was drawn to the extensive range of intellectual and technical capabilities and knowledge possessed by the system in the field of information and communications technology, in terms of both types of activity and their geographical spread. It was noted that, despite some perceptions to the contrary, the United Nations system had proven effective and imaginative in its use of information and communications technology in many areas, including innovative systems for the delivery of information. At the same time, it was recognized that coordination in this field had remained somewhat narrowly focused, involving a small number of practitioners, and with attention devoted, since the 1980s, to administrative uses of information and communications technology and, since 1993, to technical standards and guidelines. The funding of coordination in this field has been largely based on that focus. As information and communications technology activities become an integral and increasingly important part of almost all programmatic and administrative activities, the need to extend innovation and collaboration along a broader front has become evident, and a broader and more policy-oriented approach to inter-agency coordination has become essential. It is necessary, in particular, that a larger number of staff with expertise in information and communications technology share their skills

effectively so as to avoid duplication and, even more important, solve problems of common concern.

14. The meeting recommended that a strengthened coordination mechanism should concentrate on facilitating and expanding the sharing of knowledge among information and communications technology experts throughout the system, in order to further innovative solutions and develop shared visions in the use of relevant facets of information and communications technology. In serving as the primary focus for the coordination of activities in this field, the mechanism would work to define standards of formats and tools that will facilitate the exchange of data, and develop and maintain comprehensive inventories of activities. It would address aspects of a system-wide strategy, standards and guidelines for infrastructure and administrative systems and assess, by means of studies and pilot projects, the feasibility of proposals for the development of system-wide information systems that would then, in most cases, be transferred to lead agencies for development and day-to-day operation. While acknowledging the budgetary constraints in most organizations, the meeting stressed that adequate funding was needed to foster improved coordination of information and communications technology activities.

15. The conclusions and recommendations of the consultative meeting will serve as the basis for the discussions of the High-level Committee on Management on information and communications technology when it holds its first meeting in December 2000.

IV. Coordination of information and communications technology activities in the United Nations Secretariat

16. In past years, the dissemination in the United Nations Secretariat of information on the activities of the Information Systems Coordination Committee has been limited to the relatively small number of staff participating in the Committee or its working groups, in particular those dealing with library and telecommunications matters. Pertinent information was not adequately shared among most information technology professionals at Headquarters and at offices away from Headquarters, which resulted in insufficient knowledge regarding the activities of the Committee, including in the Information Technology Services Division of the Office of Central Support Services, Department of Management.

17. This situation arose because of the absence of a comprehensive information technology policy in the United Nations Secretariat. The reorganization of the Information Technology Services Division and the definition of a framework for an information technology policy in the Secretariat, outlining strategic directions in the various areas of information technology activity, has changed the situation considerably. Information technology professionals in the Information Technology Services Division, in departments and offices at Headquarters and the information technology chiefs at offices away from Headquarters have been given access to the web site of the Information Systems Coordination Committee. The new chiefs of service of the Division have also been directly involved in specific projects undertaken by the Committee.

18 Since the beginning of 2000, documentation and information on the activities of the Information Systems Coordination Committee are also being shared with information technology professionals of the United Nations Secretariat at all duty stations. The Information Technology Services Division has initiated or actively participated in the electronic sharing of information on several strategic issues of common interest, such as the security of information technology, Internet policies, privacy protection, private automatic branch exchange (PABX) technologies and sharing of experience and plans concerning PABX, personnel issues, information technology policies, enterprise resource planning systems etc. These activities have provided the United Nations Secretariat with relevant and useful information for its activities. Through its participation in the Committee and its working groups, the Secretariat has benefited from the experience gained by other organizations and has shared its knowledge and experience with others.

19. The Information Technology Services Division has also been entrusted by the Information Systems Coordination Committee with the responsibility of leading the project for the creation and establishment of a United Nations system Extranet, which will allow the sharing of information among United Nations system staff in a secure environment. The overall concept and high-level design have been finalized and

steps have been taken for the implementation of the system.

20. The Division has also provided technical assistance to the Committee and to the Office for Inter-Agency Affairs in the creation of the online directory of senior officials.

21. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library continues to play a leading role in the United Nations consortium (created by the Information Systems Coordination Committee) for purchasing licences to the electronic versions of commercial information. A memorandum of agreement has been finalized for approval towards the end of 2000. The consortium is composed of 41 participating organizations which purchase information from 15 vendors. It is estimated that, in 1998, using the advantage of the consortium, the organizations of the United Nations system purchased information worth several millions of United Nations dollars for an actual cost of $600,000.

22. The United Nations Secretariat also signed the umbrella agreement with SITA (State-of-the-art Information Technologies in Aviation business), a not-for-profit organization that provides telecommunications to airlines. Thirteen organizations have taken advantage of this agreement, which was expanded, early in 2000, to include Intranet services.

23. The Secretariat, through various participants, is also active in the working groups of the Information Systems Coordination Committee dealing with telecommunications, archives and document management. In 2000, in addition to the Information Technology Services Division, Professionals staff members of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Management (Archives), the Department of Public Information (Library), the United Nations International Drug Control Programme, the United Nations Office at Vienna, the United Nations Office at Nairobi and the United Nations Compensation Commission have directly contributed to or participated in the Information Systems Coordination Committee activities.

24. The Information Technology Services Division was actively involved in the above-mentioned inter-agency consultative meeting on the coordination of information technologies in the United Nations system. Some of the current initiatives of the United Nations, such as the inventory of systems and infrastructure in the United Nations Secretariat, are of primary interest for other organizations of the system and may be used as the basis to create a similar system. Finally, the creation of a United Nations system-wide community of information technology users is in line with a similar initiative being undertaken by the Secretariat to create such a community among information technology staff and users across duty stations.

V. Budgetary considerations

25. In terms of budgetary considerations, the Secretary-General notes that 58 per cent of the approved budget of the Information Systems Coordination Committee of $1,380,300 for the biennium 2000-2001 relates to substantive technical activities (mainly the expertise required to implement various projects that directly benefit the organizations of the system). The table below summarizes the planned expenditure for the biennium, by type of activity. Taking into account the fact that each initiative will impact on the United Nations system at large, the Secretary-General considers that the level of expenditure and the related United Nations contribution are fully justified.

26. Most of the coordination activities in this field have consisted in knowledge-sharing among information technology professionals throughout the United Nations system who are faced with similar issues and problems, albeit in different environments, countries and organizations of different size and different structure. The information technology community in the United Nations system is unique, owing to the varied experience and skills of its staff. It is impossible to attach a monetary value to the exchange of information attained so far through the biannual meetings of the Information Systems Coordination Committee and increasingly through the electronic tools available. In the industry, great importance is given to these types of meetings as one of the best means that professionals have for assessing and learning about the experience gained by others in new technologies. It is expected, however, that within the new structure being proposed for inter-agency cooperation, the focus of the coordination mechanism for information and communications technology activities will be more oriented on specific tasks than on meetings dealing with multiple issues.

Information Systems Coordination Committee: Planned expenditure for the biennium 2000-2001, by type of activity

Project activity	*United States dollars*
Telecommunications:	
Minimum standards for staff safety	
Shared technologies and facilities	
Joint procurements	98 300
Documents and archive systems:	
Standards for archives	
Standards for document indexing and retrieval	61 700
Library and information services:	
Union Catalogue of United Nations system libraries	
Digital library standards and best practice	
Field library support	
Joint access to electronic information	55 600
Internet technologies:	
United Nations system Extranet	
United Nations system portal	
Internet security standards and best practice	288 700
Strategies, resources, and management:	
Large system projects standards and best practice	
Information and communications technology staffing issues (recruitment and retention)	
Knowledge management	
Joint licences for software	114 000
Knowledge-sharing:	
Inter-organizational web sites	
Information and communications technology discussion forums	190 000
Total	**808 300**

27. The Secretary-General wishes to point out that the overall cost of coordinating information technology activities has remained stable over the past bienniums, while overall expenditure has increased dramatically. In a period of constrained resources and a reduction in the total number of staff, coordination and related projects have become additional tasks for information technology professionals in view of the limited resources available to the Information Systems Coordination Committee. It is the view of the Secretary-General that the limited resources available for coordination in this field is a major reason for the apparent limited progress.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

28. The Secretary-General considers that strengthened coordination of information and communications technology activities is essential for enabling the United Nations system to perform its functions in a more efficient manner and for ensuring that the system is best equipped to mobilize information and communications technology for development. Information and communications technology is now an essential element in most activities in all organizations and locations, and coordination in this field must be assigned priority and adequate resources.

29. The new role envisaged, within the framework of the reform of activities of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, for the High-level Committee on Management and for the coordination mechanism, based on the work of the Information Systems Coordination Committee, confirms the commitment of the executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations system to take full advantage of these critical technologies in more effectively achieving their mission. The limited resources available to the United Nations system make it essential that the coordination of information and communications technology activities be strengthened, and play a key role in the transformation of the organizations of the United Nations system into knowledge-based entities.

30. The Secretary-General thus fully endorses the strengthening of the coordination of such activities in the United Nations system being pursued within the framework of the Administrative Committee on Coordination. The arrangements made will capitalize on the work done so far by the Information Systems Coordination Committee and will be based on a prioritization of the existing work programmes of that Committee and new initiatives.

31. Continuation of the activities initiated by the Information Systems Coordination Committee is indispensable. Consequently, the Secretary-General recommends to Member States the continued funding of the United Nations contribution to the Information Systems Coordination Committee for the biennium 2000-2001 and intends to reflect the necessary appropriation adjustments in the first performance report for the biennium.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 7* (A/54/7), chap. II, para. X.16.

[2] See A/55/3, chap. III, para. 17. The report of the Council will be issued in final form as *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 3* (A/55/3/Rev.1).